



Thinking Like a Historian: Big Questions to Ask About Local History

To document past events, historians are always in search of evidence that can answer the basic questions of WHO did WHAT, WHEN & WHERE, HOW and WHY. But to understand the past and see its continuing effects on the present, historians have learned to ask more probing questions. As you work on projects about your own local history, make sure you deepen your search into the past. Choose one or more questions from each part (level) of the following list to guide your research:

Level I: “What Happened” Questions: Digging deeper into the 6-W’s

1. **Who did what ... with whom? for whom? to whom? Were they acting as individuals or groups? As private citizens or public officials? Were they making choices? What other choices or options did they have?**
 - a. The Little Rock Nine, a group of young African-American students, enrolled into Little Rock Central High School in 1957. After attending the segregated school, the Little Rock Crisis occurred, because Governor Faubus prevented them from attending.
2. **What happened ... first? next? finally? ... beforehand? ... later in time?**
 - a. On September 4th, 1957, Elizabeth Eckford made her first attempt into Little Rock Central High School. She was not allowed in by the National Guard, and was followed by a crowd of white segregationists until she stooped and sat at a bench. This bench served as a ‘safe haven’ for her until she was able to escape the mob of protesters around her.
3. **When and where did it happen ... and why then and there?**
 - a. This occurred on September 4^h, 1957 at Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. It was an attempt to desegregate the school by nine black students.
4. **How did it happen ... by accident or on purpose? what resources or tools or knowledge or power made it possible? How did it impact people?**
 - a. This happened as a result of 9 young black students who volunteered to make history and change education and civil rights in our country. It was their courage and strength that made it possible, and it still impacts students, community members and people who visit the school to learn

about its history. Thanks to the National Historic Site, people are able to visit the still functioning school and learn about the Little Rock Nine.

5. **Why did it happen?** ... *What were the major causes? Were there other contributing factors? What else was happening at the time?*
- It happened because the Civil Rights Movement motivated people to stand up for their rights and make change where change is needed. During the same year on September 9th, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was enacted by the United States Congress. This was made to try and protect civil rights for all.

Level II: "Says Who" Questions: Analyzing Sources & Evidence

6. **How do we know?** ... *Is the information from a primary source (eyewitness or participant) or secondary source (commentator or historian after the event)?*
- The information is from a primary source. We got information from one of the members of the Little Rock Nine, Ms. Elizabeth Eckford. We also used historical photos taken by Will Counts on September 4th, 1957.
7. **In what ways is the source biased?** ... *Does the source seem to have a particular point of view, and does that affect its accuracy or its trustworthiness?*
- Since the sources are primary, we can only assume that they are truthful about the event. The traumatic events that Ms. Eckford experienced cannot be doubted, and they are documented more than once.
8. **What evidence and clues does this primary document reveal?** ...
- The evidence reveals that her first encounter with Central was traumatic. It also shows different reactions from people witnessing the event. For example, the Will Counts photos show the hateful faces of the protesters and how calm Ms. Eckford looked.

Historians think like detectives and treat each primary document like evidence from a "time scene." Read each document closely. Which questions can you answer? Quote specific words and passages from the document to support your answers:

- Where did this document come from?*
 - The Will Counts photos can be found on the internet or archived in public libraries. The book *The Worst First Day: Bullied While Desegregating Central High* was written by Elizabeth Eckford, Dr. Eurydice Stanley and Grace Stanley.
- When and where was it created?*
 - The Will Counts photos were taken during the Little Rock Crisis in 1957. *The Worst First Day: Bullied While Desegregating Central High* was published in 2017.
- Who is the author?*
 - Will Counts took the historical photos. Elizabeth Eckford, Eurydice Stanley and Grace Stanley wrote the book.
- Who is the intended audience?*

- a. Will Counts wanted the world to the horrific events that happened at Little Rock Central High School. The book *The Worst First Day: Bullied While Desegregating Central High* was made for a younger audience who would enjoy learning about civil rights history. The illustrations and photos make it easier the read and remember the information.
- e. *What is the main idea of the document?*
- a. The main idea of the book is to show the progress of civil rights, bullying and Ms. Elizabeth Eckford over time.
- f. *What is the author’s purpose or intended outcome? What does the author want readers to know, feel, and/or do?*
- a. The author wants readers to understand that bullying can take different shapes, and that it has a huge impact. They also wanted to share what happened in history as an example of how courage can impact on a large scale.
- g. *If the document deals with an issue, what is the author’s point of view and whose side does the author take?*
- a. The author provides facts that speak for themselves. They show that the Little Rock Nine member, Elizabeth Eckford was able to persevere through her time at Central. It also teaches the audience to “walk past hate”.
- h. *Do details stated in this document agree or disagree with other evidence? How accurate or reliable does this document seem to be?*
- a. The details agree with other evidence, and do not contradict with facts that are stated in other books. It is reliable and provides evidence from where the sources were found.
- i. *What is the document silent about? Whose voices or viewpoints are not included?*
- a. The book does not give a lot of information or perspectives from the other member of the Little Rock Nine. However, it is a book about Ms. Elizabeth Eckford’s experience at Central High, but other viewpoint would have been interesting to hear.

Level III: “So What” Questions: Evaluating What Matters

9. Who was affected by this event and how? How many? How much? Was it for better or for worse?

- The family, friends and students who knew the Little Rock Nine were deeply affected. They experience hate and violence as well. Threats and prejudice were a tolerant occurrence for them, just because they wanted to make a difference. As a result of their courageous actions, it benefits our entire country and world.

10. Does this particular document or event relate to larger events in Arkansas history, American history, or world history?

Check this ADE list to find the time period related to your local history event:

Era 1: Pre-European Exploration Through Arkansas Settlement to 1802

Era 2: Louisiana Purchase Through Early Statehood 1803-1860

Era 3: Civil War Through the Gilded Age 1861-1900

Era 4: Early 20th Century 1901-1940

Era 5: World War II Through the Civil Rights Era 1941-1967

Era 6: Modern Era 1968 to Present

Also, use ADE Course Frameworks to find specific topics in the Arkansas, U.S., or World History courses related to your local history event:

<http://www.arkansased.gov/divisions/learning-services/curriculum-and-instruction/curriculum-framework-documents/social-studies-new-courses-valid-july-1-2015>

The event related to the Civil Rights Era, and impacts history still today.

11. Does this event in your local history illustrate one of the “recurring themes” that historians study?

Check themes in this National History Day list that might relate to the local history you’re studying:

Frontiers in History

✓ *Turning Points in History*

Exploration, Encounter, Exchange in History

Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History

Conflict & Compromise in History

✓ *Leadership & Legacy in History*

Triumph & Tragedy in History

✓ *Taking a Stand in History*

Science & Technology in History

Innovation in History

Communication in History

Rights & Responsibilities in History

Level IV: “What Now” Questions: Connecting History to Current Choices

12. In what ways is this past event in local history related to current issues or choices facing people in your community?

- This past event relates to the Elizabeth Eckford Bench project and other projects at my school that focus on reviving our history. It also relates to the topic of bullying, and the importance of standing up for other people when they need help.

13. After learning about this event or person’s story, what questions does it make you ask ... the persons involved in the event? ... the person writing the document or telling the story? ... your classmates? ... yourself?

- After learning about the event, it makes me wonder why people were taught to dislike others by their skin color. But after thinking harder, the event also makes me think about how people are able to sacrifice their happiness to do what it is right.

14. After learning about this event or person’s story, what choices would you make ... then, if you had been involved? Now, if a similar issue occurs?

- Following the 60th Anniversary of the desegregation of Little Rock Central High, I began researching this topic. It led me to research more

about the Little Rock Nine's history, and to create the Elizabeth Eckford bench to continue telling the story of what happened 61 years ago on September 4th, 1957.

Compiled from resources for teaching history from the Library of Congress American Memory Project, Smithsonian Museum of American History, National History Day, Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, Arkansas Department of Education, C3 Framework for Social Studies, and Central High Memory Project by George West, Education Outreach Coordinator, Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, Central Arkansas Library System. For more information, contact: gwest@cals.org